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Does Gender Equality Matter in Agriculture? Yes! Here's Why.



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You'll hear it over and over this International Women's Day: Gender equality matters. And we couldn't agree more.

Those of us working in agricultural development are well aware of the role that women play in advancing food security and nutrition. Many smallholder farmers in developing countries are women. Women participate in all aspects of rural life, from paid employment to trade and marketing. They raise crops and animals, collect water and wood for fuel, and care for family members.

But we didn't always understand just how critical their role was to ending global hunger. We now know that when the status of women improves, agricultural productivity increases, poverty is reduced, and nutrition improves. It's why Feed the Future prioritizes empowering women in agriculture.

In honor of International Women's Day, we asked a few friends of Feed the Future to share a moment in which they more fully appreciated the role – and potential – of women in agriculture.

In the United States, we call these “aha!” moments. They are moments of discovery and realization. Mine was after college, when I visited Malawi. You can read the full story along with others' below.

As you read, think about your own moments of discovery. When was the first time you fully realized just how important gender equality and women's empowerment were in agriculture?

“After college, I volunteered with an organization called Operation Crossroads Africa, an organization that President Kennedy called a progenitor of the Peace Corps. It was there, while visiting a rural village in Malawi, I sat with a woman whose nursing

infant was tugging at her for more food, but there was none to give. The child was small and weak, and it impressed a permanent, heartbreaking reality on me: In a village that depended on agriculture for survival, I was witnessing hunger firsthand, and it's a reality that strikes hundreds of thousands of villages, mothers, and children just like them in far too many reaches of the globe. I will never forget that mother and her child, and that experience is what propelled me into this field and kept me here."

-- Tjada McKenna, Assistant to the Administrator, USAID Bureau for Food Security and Deputy Coordinator for Development for Feed the Future

"Veronica is a farmer in Tanzania. When I met her, I was already committed to investing in food security and providing farmers, especially women, with the tools and resources they need to grow nutritious food. She told our group that she had learned about irrigation and new agricultural techniques that allowed her to not only feed her family, but produce additional food to sell. She was able to support her family and even buy a vehicle to take her food and the produce of other female farmers in her area to the market. At the time, she was saving for farm equipment. Veronica was empowered and engaging. I saw how the investments we make in agricultural development have ripple effects that improve the economic security of women, families, communities, and nations."

-- Congresswoman Betty McCollum, U.S. House of Representatives, Minnesota

"Zipporah Biketi, a farmer in *The Last Hunger Season* book, agonized over the declining nutrition and health of her four children as their **hunger season** deepened. 'When you, as a parent, see your child not eating enough to be satisfied, you are hurt, but you are not in a position to control the situation,' Zipporah told me. It was then I realized that women farmers feel they are failing on two fronts when their harvests fall short: as farmers, because of their low yields; and, as mothers, because their children are malnourished. Empowering these women farmers through agricultural development will put them in position to 'control the situation' by conquering their hunger seasons and properly nourishing their children."

-- Roger Thurow, Author and Senior Fellow, Global Agriculture and Food, Chicago Council on Global Affairs

"Empowering women has a multiplier effect on strengthening communities, and I have seen firsthand how true this really is when it comes to ending hunger and undernutrition. Not only are women critical contributors to global agriculture production, but they invest the majority of their income back into their families, educating, nourishing and immunizing their children. These children are, in turn, better prepared to contribute to their community, their country and their economy. So when it comes to ending hunger and undernutrition, investing in women is one of the wisest, most effective investments you can make."

-- Catherine M. Russell, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, U.S. Department of State

"From my experience working on agriculture programming for smallholder farmers in rural areas of India, the participation of women can be real game-changer. Often when we think of farmers, the image of men comes to mind, despite the fact that women are involved in 70 percent of agriculture activities, which are labor-intensive activities. It's fascinating to see how active participation from women in the projects helps to improve overall farm production, food availability and nutrition for families. We could clearly see the ripple effect. In one example from Bihar, women in self-help groups taught other women what they had learned about accessing credit and connecting with banks. Women were highly receptive to the new trainings, wanted to experiment with new agricultural techniques, and were more confident with their new knowledge and leadership. All of this helps families to attain better farm productivity, income and food availability."

-- Rakhi Bhattacharya, India Country Director, Lutheran World Relief

"It is estimated that the odds of a child being severely malnourished are reduced by **half** if her mother owns land. In December 2009, I had the opportunity to see this powerful statistic in person while visiting rural Guatemalan communities improving nutrition and agriculture with Save the Children and the U.S. Government. Many of the women I met ran farms and

introduced me to their children, whose nutrition was improving thanks to their crops and livestock along with peer nutrition education. The very few women who [owned their own land](#) had remarkable agriculture and nutrition results. From this experience, I learned that women's access and control of economic resources – including [land](#) – can help break the cycle of malnutrition and poverty."

-- Jennifer Rigg, Director of Policy and Partnerships, Thousand Days

"I'm convinced that increasing incomes for women is the path to decrease poverty. Women have the passion for their kids' needs. When you increase their income, the children and the whole family benefit. I'm eager to work with women [as part of my outgrower farmer network]. In my experience, women achieve higher yields than men. They typically cultivate a smaller parcel and can therefore give it more care. They also pay greater attention to instructions. For example, they follow technical guidance on how much fertilizer to use and get better yields as a result."

-- Martin Arikui, CEO, Arikui Farms, Ghana

The reality is that despite their critical role, women in agriculture face multiple constraints that limit their potential and keep them in poverty. Relative to men, women tend to own less land, are less able to hire labor, and have impeded access to credit, extension and other training services.

Drawing from best practices gathered from across the U.S. Government and the international community, Feed the Future is [helping women](#) get the resources, skills, tools and knowledge they need to reach their full agricultural productive capacity. Our investments promote women's leadership in agriculture, foster policy changes that increase women's land ownership, and strengthen their access to financial services.

When women are empowered, potential can be expanded, productivity can grow, and families can thrive. Together with our partners around the globe, we're making it happen.

What about you? What made you realize that women can be the key to agricultural success? Let us know on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) using the hashtag #WomeninAg.